

**Economic and Social Council**

Distr.: General
28 June 2017

Original: English

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
Sixty-first session**Summary record of the 31st meeting**

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Tuesday, 13 June 2017, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Ms. Bras Gomes

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Consideration of reports (continued)

(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant (continued)

Initial report of Pakistan (continued) (E/C.12/PAK/1, E/C.12/PAK/Q/1 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Pakistan took places at the Committee table.*

2. **Mr. Khan** (Pakistan) said that Pakistan had made great strides in ensuring women's rights in the past 20 years, thanks to the adoption of numerous new laws and efforts to change mindsets and attitudes. Most recently, the Prime Minister had approved a three-year programme for the empowerment of women. Women were now better represented at the higher echelons of public administration, in the diplomatic corps and the judiciary, and among government ministers. Certain provinces had adopted laws setting a 30 per cent quota for women's representation in all government positions, and 22 per cent of parliamentarians in the national parliament and local government bodies must be women.

3. Although jirgas were rare and had been criminalized, unfortunate events involving them continued to occur, and in response the Government had adopted a particularly hard line against them. While personal law was governed mainly by Islamic jurisprudence and a few provisions of the Penal Code stemmed from Islamic law, the vast majority of the legal system was based on common law. The Prime Minister had established a Law Review Committee, whose mandate consisted in updating all civil and criminal laws. The Committee had already scrutinized most of the country's legislation.

4. The rule of primogeniture was not applicable and inheritance was governed by strict rules that were set by law on the basis of Muslim jurisprudence. According to the logic underlying that jurisprudence, women were entitled to half as much as men because they inherited from two sources: their husbands and their fathers. That practice was closely linked with Muslim culture and would be extremely difficult to change. The Government had, however, taken steps to improve the situation for female heirs. In the past, women had been forced to bring court cases in order to enjoy their inheritance rights, but the law had been amended so that property was transferred automatically and much more quickly.

5. While polygamy still existed, it was extremely rare. From the legal standpoint, polygamy required agreement in writing from the first wife or submission of an application to an arbitration council appointed by the Government. In his 33 years of legal practice he had heard of only a few cases where polygamy had been authorized. It was a criminal offence to practise polygamy without fulfilling the legal prerequisites. A recently adopted law criminalized forced marriage and further stipulated that stricter sanctions applied if the forced marriage was with a member of a religious minority.

6. **Ms. Riffat** (Pakistan) said that in 2014/15, the labour force had numbered 61 million, of whom 57 million had been employed, with 43 per cent engaged in agriculture, 22 per cent in industry and 35 per cent in services. The informal sector had accounted for 73 per cent of the workforce, and 69 per cent of workers had been located in rural areas. There had been steady improvement between 2008 and 2015 in the reduction of school dropout and poverty rates, with better employment-to-population ratios, increasing youth employment, reductions in unemployment among women and a closing of the gender wage gap. Additional statistics would be made available to the Committee in due course.

7. A national labour protection framework was currently being developed to coordinate the implementation of the various laws adopted by the provinces and ensure that the country met all its obligations under the various international labour conventions. The framework was expected to be operational by the end of July 2017. Pakistan had ratified 36 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) labour conventions, including the 8 core conventions. A national tripartite consultative committee had been established to assist in the implementation of labour conventions. The Government had drawn up an occupational

safety and health bill that had been shared with the provincial administrations, which were drafting their own legislation, in some cases with ILO technical assistance.

8. It was difficult for workers to make ends meet on the minimum wages set by the provincial governments. Extensive deliberations had been held with the provincial labour departments, and the idea of a living wage had been raised in 2016. It was important to note that workers receiving the minimum wage, if covered by the Workers' Welfare Fund, also received other benefits, including housing at nominal rates, excellent education facilities for their children and health-care services, both during their working life and after retirement. Many retired people also received subsistence allowances to supplement their old-age pensions. Social security institutions at the provincial level provided health care, education and workers' compensation.

9. The Prime Minister had initiated programmes to support employment among youth and to help them escape the cycle of poverty, including the Prime Minister's Youth Programme and the Benazir Income Support Programme. Unemployed youths also benefited from the Prime Minister's Youth Business Loan Initiative, which provided between 100,000 and 2 million rupees (PRs) of credit at subsidized rates. Half of the business loans were granted to women. Interest-free loans were also provided to families. Other programmes provided vocational training for people starting their own businesses.

10. Although there was no gender discrimination in the law, the Government acknowledged that, in practice, discrimination occurred. The Government had held discussions with the Employers' Federation of Pakistan on how to address the problem, which was also being dealt with in the context of the national labour protection framework. Activities to combat bonded labour were mainly undertaken at the provincial level. Further information on the subject would be provided to the Committee at a later date. The Government recognized that the number of labour inspectors was currently insufficient and was taking steps to fill their ranks.

11. The Constitution and the law recognized the right of all workers, except those in the military, the police and the security agencies, to form trade unions. The Government was aware of the need to support trade unionism and had engaged in tripartite discussions specifically aimed at encouraging unionization of the banking sector. Sindh Province had drafted a law for the protection of agricultural and fisheries workers, most of whom were women, thus bringing them into the formal sector and organizing the workforce in a trade union. Sindh Province and Punjab Province had adopted legislation fostering integration of home-based and domestic workers into the formal sector. The organization of home-based workers had called for the country's ratification of the ILO Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177). The Government favoured ratification; however, the necessary institutions and laws must first be put in place.

12. **Ms. Malik** (Pakistan) said that there were a large number of madrasas and that they were widely accepted in Pakistani society. While madrasas had taken on a negative connotation in certain circles, that reputation was not warranted. Until recently, they had been exclusively religious schools established at the grass-roots level, but had now been mainstreamed into the education system. The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the National Counter Terrorism Authority had all worked closely with the country's largest association of madrasas to reform their curricula in order to include modern subjects and thereby improve students' qualifications and chances for employment. Selection of schools was fundamentally the prerogative of parents, but the Government monitored the subjects taught and the programmes that were implemented to ensure certain standards.

13. **Ms. Liebenberg** said that the Committee had been informed that workers in stone crushing companies in Gujranwala suffered from high rates of silicosis. She would like to hear about any steps taken to provide compensation to victims and to protect workers against silicosis. She also wished to know what specific measures were in place to protect workers against reprisals and victimization when they filed complaints or engaged in trade union activities.

14. **Mr. De Schutter** said that he would like clarification of how beneficiaries of cash transfers under the Benazir Income Support Programme were designated, as the procedure

apparently was based not on objective needs assessments but on the amount of money available. According to the State party's replies to the list of issues (E.C.12/PAK/Q/1/Add.1), the criteria were based on "available fiscal space". Was the Programme able to reach all intended beneficiaries? What measures were implemented to ensure that, notwithstanding the obstacles of high illiteracy and lack of information, beneficiaries were made aware of their rights and could claim benefits? Was the Programme rights-based or charity-based? In the event of denial of benefits, was there an independent claims procedure for challenging the denial?

15. **Mr. Windfuhr**, noting that some 250 people had perished in an industrial accident at Ali Enterprises in Karachi in 2012, asked how the Government viewed the role of labour inspectorates in preventing such accidents. He would also be interested in hearing the Government's views with regard to the responsibility of retail companies that purchased goods from Pakistani companies. He welcomed the steps taken to improve wages in the informal sector and would like to hear about any measures to provide social security for informal-sector workers.

16. **Mr. Sadi** (Country Task Force) said that the State party had sound legislation and policies for the protection of labour rights, but it appeared that they were not being applied. It was essential to take practical action, such as the hiring of more labour inspectors, to give effect to the laws. The level of the minimum wage was not in keeping with the provisions of the Covenant, which called for remuneration to be capable of sustaining a decent or adequate standard of living. Unfair wages resulted in poverty, which in turn led to security concerns. The State party could more effectively address security concerns if it reduced its spending on security per se and increased resources in support of decent remuneration and social well-being.

17. **Ms. Shin** (Country Task Force) asked whether the Government had devised any long-term plans, with fixed targets, to address labour-related issues. If so, how did it intend to secure participation by the provinces in such efforts? Was there a long-term plan to expand social security to ensure coverage for all workers? How did the Government ensure that the quotas that had been set were implemented in practice? Which trade union federation represented Pakistani trade unions during the International Labour Conference?

18. **The Chair**, noting the importance of the draft national labour protection framework, invited the Government to consider the Committee's general comment No. 23 (2016) on the right to just and favourable conditions of work, which provided guidance on many of the issues to be addressed by the framework.

19. **Ms. Riffat** (Pakistan) said that the occupational safety and health bill had been drawn up largely in response to the silicosis problem at the Gujranwala site, as the outbreak had underscored the fact that a stand-alone law to ensure workers' safety and health should be enacted at the federal level. The adoption of a federal law should prompt the provinces in turn to adopt similar legislation. Sindh Province had already adopted a range of laws on occupational safety and health. The Government acknowledged the need to increase the number of labour inspectors substantially in order to ensure the effectiveness of existing legislation. The national labour protection framework would set specific goals and action plans for the provinces to increase their labour inspection staffs. In addition, the national tripartite consultative committee, which convened four times a year, addressed such issues, providing guidance and expertise to provincial and other local labour authorities.

20. **Mr. Amil** (Pakistan) said that the Benazir Income Support Programme was a rights-based initiative and that one of its main goals was to empower women. The aim was not to provide cash handouts per se, but to bring about incremental, generational change to empower women. Because of its nature and large scope, it had encountered some teething problems, but great progress had been made, in particular in rural areas where the very fact that women for the first time had obtained access to money of their own was revolutionary. The children of such women were being raised in a new context, where the economic role of their mothers and sisters was acknowledged and recognized. Obviously, a programme of such a scale could not reach everyone overnight, and it was still extending its reach. A number of factors defined by teams in the field were considered when determining who would be best served by the Programme.

21. **Ms. Agha** (Pakistan) added that the Programme had grown over the years, with the amount disbursed rising from PKRs 16 billion in 2008 to over PKRs 100 billion in the current year. Over 5 million women had benefited. Poverty was estimated to have decreased by about 7 per cent in the areas where the Programme had been implemented. A demographic survey conducted in 2012 had been used as a basis for defining poverty, and a National Socio-Economic Registry was currently being developed to update the data from the survey and assess the extent to which the situation of the families served by the Programme had improved. The Registry included a self-registration component whereby women could sign up for benefits. It was already operational in 16 districts and was expected to be functioning nationally by the end of 2017. The aim was to increase the number of beneficiaries and extend the programme still further. Under the Programme, families were encouraged to enrol their children in primary school in return for cash transfers. Some PKRs 2.9 billion had thus far been disbursed for that purpose and about 1.3 million children had been enrolled.

22. **Mr. Khan** (Pakistan) said that numerous types of quotas existed in Pakistan. Quotas made it possible to ensure representation in the federal workforce of people from the areas with the lowest levels of social and economic development. Five per cent of official posts were reserved for women and 2 per cent were reserved for persons with disabilities. Quotas had also been established for transgender persons and other groups. At the provincial level, some provinces had adopted quotas of up to 30 per cent for the employment of women at the managerial level, and proposals had been made to adopt similar quotas at the federal level. In the parliament, 20 per cent of seats were reserved for women, and women were among the most vocal and active members.

23. Pakistan was in transition from a feudal to a modern, egalitarian, fully democratic society. Attitudes had changed immensely in the previous 20 years, in particular with the ratification of a number of international human rights conventions. Campaigns for women's and children's rights and the rights of minorities and persons with disabilities, which in the past had prompted disdain, now enjoyed widespread support. He agreed that increased spending on social and economic welfare and human rights would have a positive effect on the country's security. The fact that Pakistan had for 30 or 40 years been a front-line State in a conflict-ridden region had had a highly adverse effect on the country's infrastructure and its attractiveness for investment.

24. **Mr. Michael** (Pakistan) said that, from its inception, Pakistan had ensured the rights of minority religions. The Government continued to show deep concern about minority issues and to entrust positions of power to members of minorities. He himself was a Christian, and he had served in various posts of great responsibility. Representatives of minority religions had occupied seats in the parliament and currently headed the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination and the excise department. Four seats in the Senate were reserved for members of minority groups. In the federal and provincial government administrations, 5 per cent of posts were reserved for minorities.

25. **Ms. Agha** (Pakistan) said that 50 per cent of microfinance loans and 12 per cent of vocational training places were reserved for women. She had been informed that the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan was in the process of preparing its annual report and would hold a meeting in that connection on 15 June 2017. Its application for A status would be submitted thereafter.

26. **Ms. Riffat** (Pakistan) said that Pakistani workers would be represented at the 106th session of the International Labour Conference by Mr. Zahoor Awan, who headed the country's most representative labour confederation. With regard to occupational health and safety, the Committee was correct in that many labour and welfare issues could be better addressed by having inspectors in place. The report "GSP-Plus and Compliance with Core Labour Standards: Pakistan's Case", which the delegation would send to the Committee, mentioned a number of steps due to be taken in that sphere. In particular, the Government had drafted guidelines for risk assessments of relevant enterprises to be carried out at the provincial level. It also planned to engage the private sector by granting licences to accredited companies to perform specific inspection tasks under the authority of the labour inspectorate. According to the Labour Force Survey 2014-2015, Pakistan had had 334 labour inspectors at that time; the figure had risen to 570 in 2017. Planned administrative reforms to be carried out under the national labour protection framework included creating

separate labour inspection authorities at the provincial level and increasing penalties for non-compliance with labour laws. Inspection reports would be published annually, in accordance with the ILO Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81). In addition, online complaints mechanisms were being developed and inspection reporting was being computerized in the Province of Punjab.

27. **Mr. Amil** (Pakistan) said that the Federal Ombudsman Secretariat had transformed the mindset and the culture in Pakistan by making it possible to discuss and register complaints. Following the enactment of the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution and the devolution of responsibilities to the provincial assemblies, the Ombudsman had established provincial offices and had set up an online mechanism and a toll-free telephone number to receive complaints. Decisions were made within a 60-day period and unsuccessful complainants were able to appeal to the President of Pakistan. They could also turn to the courts or seek other legal remedies. Pakistani citizens living abroad could also raise grievances through the system. The number of complaints had risen from 75,000 in 2013 to 102,780 in 2015, which highlighted the Government's success in reaching out to citizens and enabling them to respond.

28. **Mr. Sadi** said that he was dismayed to learn that polygamy continued to be practised in Pakistan. The jurisprudence of the Committee made it clear that polygamy was unacceptable under the Covenant and should not be allowed under any circumstances. Moreover, although he was not an expert on sharia law, in his view the practice was incompatible with the Qur'an and should be prohibited on that basis, too. While he appreciated that measures had been taken to address honour crimes, he did not believe that the practice had been eradicated, particularly in rural areas. He would appreciate information on cases in which the State had taken action against those who killed in the name of honour. A comment from the delegation on the troubling reports of rape, gang rape, abduction and kidnapping in the country would also be welcome.

29. Noting that abortion was permitted only in order to save the life of the woman, but not in cases of incest or rape, he asked how the State party justified the prohibition of abortion in such circumstances and whether it might revisit its policy. He would welcome examples of cases in which individuals who did not respect the minimum marriage age had been prosecuted. He wished to know the status of the bill on Hindu and Christian marriage, which was apparently still under consideration in parliament. Until it passed, Hindus and Christians would continue to be subjected to norms that were not part of their religion. He would also be grateful for information on the Government's approach to birth registration, since it seemed common for infants and children not to be registered, which deprived them of rights and benefits such as health care and social security.

30. He believed that the State party would not be able to achieve true security while levels of poverty, food insecurity and child malnutrition remained persistently high and a large proportion of Pakistanis continued to lack access to adequate housing, drinking water and sanitation. The statistics he had read in relation to those problems seemed to be a prescription for insecurity and therefore he questioned why the Government was diverting resources to other areas, such as defence. Lastly, he wished to learn why the right to health was not included in the Constitution in the same way as the right to education. He was also curious as to why the Government allocated scarcely 1 per cent of GDP to health.

31. **Mr. De Schutter** said that he would welcome information on the budget allocated to the infant and young child feeding strategy and on any assessments of the strategy since its inception. He was concerned that a relatively low percentage of women practised exclusive breastfeeding for six months after birth, as recommended by the World Health Organization. He would like to know whether the Government planned to extend the coverage of the Protection of Breastfeeding and Child Nutrition Ordinance of 2002, initially implemented in Punjab, to all provinces. He also wished to know whether penalties such as fines or prison terms were effectively applied to those found to be in breach of the Ordinance, which prohibited the sale, marketing and advertising of breast-milk substitutes, in accordance with the 1981 International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes.

The meeting was suspended at 11.50 a.m. and resumed at 12.05 p.m.

32. **Mr. Amil** (Pakistan) said that the Government had taken steps to improve the health situation in the country. The National Health Vision 2016-2025 set out a common strategy for the federal and provincial governments that was in line with the international health treaties, regulations and commitments to which Pakistan was a signatory. The Government aimed to achieve universal health coverage and to that end had launched the Prime Minister's National Health Programme targeting those living below the poverty line of US\$ 2 per day. The Programme had already been rolled out in 15 districts and was providing free medical and reproductive health services to approximately 3.1 million families. The Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan had developed regulations for the use of medicines and medical devices, while a medicine pricing policy had been designed to ensure the provision of affordable, quality medicines to the most vulnerable groups.

33. The Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination had developed an action plan that identified 10 priority areas — including reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and nutrition. A recently formulated action plan on newborn health called for the introduction of new care methods, practices and tools; upgrading of infrastructure; and capacity-building for health-care providers. The Government had implemented the Lady Health Workers Programme, which provided outreach services, including counseling and primary health care, to women, girls and infants. Those services were provided in addition to those available at maternal and neonatal health centres and other health facilities. Several developments were envisaged at the provincial level, including the expansion of a free rural ambulance service for pregnant women in Punjab.

34. The Government pursued gender mainstreaming in its policies and development plans, employing a scientific, evidence-based method that drew on numerous studies and reports on gender impacts. The Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination had worked in coordination with the World Health Organization to develop guidelines and protocols for health-care providers. Moreover, materials had been prepared to publicly disseminate information about the Covenant so that the people of Pakistan were aware of their rights. The Government had also held capacity-building courses on human rights and health equity, which had also been replicated in a number of provinces.

35. For some 60 years, health sector expenditure had accounted for only about 0.6 per cent of GDP. Under the National Health Vision 2016-2025, however, the Government had committed to raising that figure to 3 per cent of GDP by 2025 and steps had already been taken in that direction. The health budget in Sindh Province, for example, had risen from PRs 79 billion in 2016 to 100 billion in 2017. Additional statistics on health spending would be provided in due course. Health insurance schemes were provided by the federal and provincial governments for poor and vulnerable groups. As part of a phased programme in several provinces and territories, people living below the poverty line had been issued with health cards that entitled each family to access health services valued at between PRs 300,000 and 600,000 per family per year. It was expected that 70 districts would benefit from that programme by the end of 2017 and 100 million people would be covered within five years.

36. **Ms. Malik** (Pakistan) said that the Government was cognizant of the food security situation and recognized that failing to improve nutritional outcomes would not only impede citizens' right to lead healthy and productive lives, but would also undermine economic progress. The federal Government had therefore placed nutrition at the centre of its development policies and supported the provinces in the development of nutrition programmes. The Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, in collaboration with provincial health departments, United Nations agencies and NGO partners, continued to prevent and treat malnutrition among vulnerable groups, especially children. Stunting prevention programmes were being implemented in selected districts with the support of the World Food Programme. The Community Management of Acute Malnutrition Programme was being implemented in districts with a higher incidence of acute malnutrition. Rules for the implementation and monitoring of the Protection of Breastfeeding and Child Nutrition Ordinance had been formulated in 2009 and all provinces had enacted similar legislation. At the national level, the promotion and advertisement of breast-milk substitutes in the media and in hospitals was prohibited and

offenders were prosecuted. Breastfeeding was seen as a natural part of Pakistani culture and tradition.

37. **Mr. Khan** (Pakistan) said that he agreed with the Committee's views on polygamy; however, even after laws were in place, it took time to deter such behaviours, which had existed for centuries. The Government had continued to address the issue in its human rights campaigns and hoped eventually to ensure that the practice was no longer accepted by society.

38. The Government had abolished all forms of pardon for honour crimes and had strengthened its investigation and prosecution regime in response to a number of serious cases. One notable case had recently occurred in Multan, in which the parents and brothers of the murdered celebrity Qandeel Baloch had been remanded in custody pending the outcome of their trial; there had been another recent case in which the perpetrators had been sentenced to death. The number of honour killings had fallen dramatically as a result of the Government's policy, which was that there was no honour in any crime and that women ought to be respected and allowed to make their own choices. The law had been amended so that perpetrators could no longer plead grave provocation as a defence. The Government was strict in dealing with crimes such as gang rape and the courts and prosecutors were fully aware of their seriousness. Those found guilty of involvement were executed, notwithstanding external pressure not to apply the death penalty.

39. Although abortion was technically a criminal offence, the law in that regard was not enforced and he had never heard of a prosecution for abortion in Pakistan. In the 1990s, the law had been amended to allow legal abortion for reasons relating to the woman's health, which could be liberally interpreted to include her mental or physical health, including in the circumstances mentioned by Mr. Sadi.

40. With regard to child marriage, it was true that girls as young as 15 had been married, especially in parts of southern Pakistan. The Government was attempting to address the issue through a multipronged strategy that sought to remove parents' chief motivation for seeking under-age marriage — namely that they considered their daughter to be a burden — by ensuring that girls were enrolled in school or vocational training. The laws had been tightened so that under-age marriage carried penalties of varying degrees of severity, depending on the region.

41. Births were registered by the National Database and Registration Authority and local government bodies had also been empowered to carry out registration, which conferred various privileges, including access to State services, the jobs market and the issuance of driving licences. Registration fees had been abolished, and non-registration was increasingly rare.

42. **Ms. Agha** (Pakistan) said that the Government was working hard to ensure access to drinking water. According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey carried out in 2010-2011, 91 per cent of the population had had access to improved drinking water sources, meaning that Pakistan had achieved the target established under the Millennium Development Goals. Drinking water quality standards had been strengthened and the quality of bottled water was regularly monitored. Groundwater was monitored by the Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources. An action plan had been prepared to mitigate arsenic and fluoride content in groundwater. The Government had also launched a clean drinking water project in which it had installed 6,000 water filtration tanks. Provincial and district governments were installing water filtration plants with the assistance of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank. All provinces had developed water and sanitation policies and strategies, with Punjab and Sindh in particular allocating resources to the construction and rehabilitation of water and sewerage facilities in rural and urban areas. Water quality monitoring laboratories had been established and upgraded and water metering had been introduced to ensure the judicious use of water resources.

43. **Mr. Uprimny** (Country Task Force) said that he welcomed the inclusion of education as a fundamental right under article 25 of the Constitution, the trend towards increased spending on education, the development of a national plan of action on education and the reported increase in the average number of years of schooling. Nevertheless, the

situation with regard to the right to education in Pakistan remained poor. School enrolment was low, especially among women and girls, and consequently illiteracy rates were high. He was also concerned about the quality of education, given that only 55 per cent of children in the fifth grade were able to read. Further concerns related to the ratio of children to teachers, which had risen from 33 in 1990 to 46 in 2015, and the fact that only 50 per cent of schools had toilets, which presented a further barrier to access, especially for girls. The dropout rate was also high. Those problems reflected the low level of financing for education — about 2.5 per cent of GDP — coupled with a lack of coordination by the State since the devolution of education powers to the provinces.

44. In the light of that situation, he would welcome information on any initiatives aimed at increasing the education budget with a view to achieving universal free access for all children. It would also be useful to receive information on the mechanisms available to the State to ensure that the education budget was fully implemented in the provinces and to reduce gender, regional and income-related disparities in education. He would also like to know what steps were being taken to improve the quality of teaching and of facilities and how the State party provided education for children with disabilities and ensured access to education for the large number of internally displaced persons.

45. In his view, private schooling did not offer a good solution to the State party's problems in the education sphere, since it obliged people to pay to exercise their rights. He was concerned that private schools had proliferated to such an extent that there was a risk of a segregated education system, with children from low-income families relegated to poor-quality public schools. He wished to learn how the State party might prevent such segregation and how it monitored the quality of private schools.

46. The Committee had been disturbed by reports that school textbooks in Sindh and Punjab Provinces included content that was discriminatory against religious minorities. What actions were being undertaken to avoid such discrimination in schools? While he recognized that not all madrasas taught sectarian fundamentalism, he was nevertheless concerned that some of them engaged in an indoctrination process. How did the State ensure that children attended madrasas because their families genuinely wanted them to have a religious education and that they were not obliged to attend due to the lack of high-quality State schools? In the light of reports of attacks against schools and the use of schools by the armed forces for military purposes, he would like to hear how the Government ensured the security of schools and whether it planned to sign the Safe Schools Declaration and implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.

47. He had received figures indicating that Internet access was very limited in Pakistan and wished to know how the Government intended to guarantee universal and equal digital access. Although minority languages were protected under the Constitution, he was concerned that such protection was not being afforded in practice and would welcome information on any steps taken to ensure that minority language speakers were able to speak their language and develop their culture. The situation in relation to minority rights was also unclear and further explanation of the protections in place would be appreciated, especially for minorities other than religious minorities. The Committee would particularly like to hear how Pakistan reconciled respect for cultural and religious diversity with the Objectives Resolution in the Constitution, which established that Pakistan was an Islamic country. It would also be interesting to know whether the delegation considered that the law criminalizing blasphemy — and making it punishable by death — was compatible with respect for the cultural diversity of non-Muslims.

48. **The Chair** said that the Committee had a shared understanding of how the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights could assist countries such as Pakistan in addressing certain problems. She believed that in some respects Pakistan was taking strides towards modernity, while in others it was held back by negative cultural stereotypes and an inability to overcome entrenched problems.

The meeting rose at 12.55 p.m.